DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 046 PS 024 465

AUTHOR Tirri, Kirsi
TITLE The Themes of Moral Dilemmas Formulated by Preadolescents.
PUB DATE 11 Apr 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Content Analysis; *Early Adolescents; Foreign Countries; *Gifted; *Moral Development; *Moral Issues
IDENTIFIERS Finland

ABSTRACT

This study compared themes of moral dilemmas constructed by 12- and 13-year-olds from a Finnish public school and a special school for academically gifted students. Participating were 87 sixth graders, representing the general population of adolescents, and 27 gifted adolescents. Students were given 30 minutes to write a story representing a realistic moral problem. A descriptive content analysis of the themes of the stories was used to develop 10 main theme categories. One theme was identified for each story. Results indicated that the themes of the moral dilemmas included peer relationships, alcohol and smoking, family and divorce, illicit drug use, self concept conflicts, animal rights, stealing, life and death involving murder or suicide, reporting a witnessed infraction, and harassment. In both the gifted and general populations, most of the dilemmas related to peer relationship conflicts and interpersonal issues. None of the stories of gifted students dealt with conflicts over alcohol or smoking, drugs, or self concept. All the conflicts focusing on self concept, alcohol and smoking, and animal rights were written by girls. Only boys wrote about conflicts dealing with life and death issues. (Two appendices detail the instructions and provide story examples.) (KDFB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 399 046

The themes of moral dilemmas formulated by preadolescents

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dr. Kirsi Tirri
Department of Teacher Education
University of Helsinki

A paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association April 11, 1996. New York, NY.

PS 024465

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kirsi Tirri

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Running head: THE THEMES OF MORAL DILEMMAS BY PREADOLESCENTS

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the themes of moral dilemmas as formulated by preadolescents. The sample of students selected for the study was taken from an ordinary Finnish public school and from a special school for the academically gifted. For each student one central theme was identified, the one most central to the moral problem. The themes of the stories generated by the students from two different schools were compared to find the possible differences between these two groups of adolescents. The main interest of the study was to explore if the themes identified by the gifted adolescents differ from those generated by the general population. This study also aimed at complementing the earlier American (Yussen 1977, Colangelo 1982) and Canadian research (Binfet 1995) on the same topic by validating the findings with Finnish population.

The general framework for this study is an attempt to address several questions:

- Q1: What are the themes of the moral dilemmas identified by preadolescents?
- Q2: Are there any gender differences in the themes identified?
- Q3: Are the themes identified by the gifted different from those identified by the general population?

Theoretical Framework

Most of the studies in the area of moral development have based their theory on the cognitive-developmental theory identified by Lawrence Kohlberg (e.g., 1969). In a classical interview the subject is presented with hypothetical moral dilemmas and a series of questions. Responses to these questions are analyzed to determine the stage of

moral reasoning of the subject. One of the areas of criticism of Kohlberg's procedures has been the lack of diversity in the moral dilemmas that have been used in the interviews (Yussen 1977). The hypothetical dilemmas can also be seen as too abstract and removed from the daily experiences of most people (Straughan 1975). Recognition of these aspects in hypothetical dilemmas has led educational researches to study real-life moral problems that people identify (Walker et al. 1987).

The research conducted in this area shows that the adolescents formulate very different dilemmas from the hypothetical dilemmas used by Kohlberg and his colleagues to assess moral reasoning. Most of the dilemmas formulated by Kohlberg focus on issues of ownership, public welfare and life-and-death. In Yussen's (1977) study the themes of moral dilemmas formulated by adolescents focused most frequently on interpersonal relations. Colangelo (1982) found the same tendency in his study with gifted adolescents. In an Canadian study preadolescents identified most moral dilemmas that dealt with issues of peer pressure and honesty (Binfet 1995).

Methods

One hundred fourteen sixth grade students (12 to 13-year-olds) from two different schools in Finland were asked to generate stories involving a moral problem and to provide a solution. The majority of students (N=87) came from an ordinary public school representing the general population of adolescents and twenty-seven students who attended a special school for the academically gifted represented the gifted adolescents. The students were given 30 minutes to write a story that presented a realistic moral problem (see the instruction in Appendix A.). For both of the schools the gender distribution was approximately equal. The method used to analyze the stories

was descriptive content analysis. The stories were analyzed by their themes. In each story only one theme was identified. A total of ten main categories of themes was formed. Where applicable, the categories identified by Yussen and Colangelo were used. The interrater reliability was .90, based on the independent scoring of 20 stories by two raters and an index of (number of rater agreement)/(number of stories).

The themes identified by the gifted students were contrasted to the themes identified by the general population. The differences between boys and girls were also examined. Descriptive trends were discussed with the help of percentage of the each category of themes identified. The chi-square statistic was used to test the significance of differences found.

Results

The themes of the moral dilemmas formulated by the preadolescents focused on the following main categories identified in the analysis: Peer relations, referred to conflicts over friendships and interpersonal social behavior; Alcohol and smoking to the conflicts over deciding whether to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes or not; Family relations referred to conflicts involving parents mainly matters concerning divorce; Drugs to the use of illicit drugs; Self-concept to conflicts about who am I?; Animal rights referred to issues related to the welfare of animals; Stealing to illegal theft of property and money; Life and death to conflicts involving murder, suicide, etc.; Reporting an infraction referred to conflicts over reporting illegal acts that were witnessed; Harassing to all kinds of tormenting behavior at school or outside school. The category Miscellanous included themes which did not fit to the categories above.

These rare cases dealt with themes such as choosing between two hobbies or two professions.

The analysis revealed many similarities and differences between the gifted adolescents and the general population (see Table 1). In both groups most of the stories focused on the peer relations, conflicts concerning friendships and interpersonal relationships. This finding validated the previous findings by Yussen and Colangelo showing that the most relevant real-life dilemma identified by preadolescents concerned interpersonal relationships regardless of their academic achievement.

Some of the categories of themes were totally lacking in the stories written by the gifted students. None of their stories referred to conflicts over alcohol or smoking, drugs or self-concept..

Insert Table 1 about here

The following observations from the gender differences can be made (see Figure 1). All the conflicts that focused on self-concept, alcohol and smoking and animal rights were written by girls. On the other hand the category that dealt with life-and-death issues had only male authors. The theme of life and death is one of the main themes in the moral dilemmas formulated by Kohlberg. The hypothetical themes have been critisized for favoring male authors (Gilligan 1982). In this study the "life and death" theme attracted only boys thus supporting Gilligan's claime.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Importance of the Study

This study validated the American and Canadian studies on the moral dilemmas generated by adolescents. Based on the findings it seems that the main moral dilemmas identified by preadolescents in Western countries include issues related to interpersonal, friendship relations. These issues were shown to be the dominant themes in both boys' and girls' stories. The students from the general population and from the gifted population shared the same interest in these peer relations. The study also showed that in some of the themes boys and girls differ. In the same way the students from the ordinary school identified some themes that the gifted ones didn't see as problematic.

These results show that there is a need to add dilemmas that deal with interpersonal relationships to the procedures assessing the moral development at least with adolescents. Educators and teachers can profit from these results by directing the topics of their moral discussions to these areas that have been proven to be the main concerns of students.

References

Binfet, J. 1995. Identifying the themes in student-generated moral dilemmas. A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 18th, 1995, San Francisco, CA:

Colangelo, N. 1982. Characteristics of moral problems as formulated by gifted adolescents. Journal of Moral Education, 11, 4, 219-232.

Gilligan, C. 1982. In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Kohlberg, L. 1969. Stage and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.) Handbook of socialization theory and research. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Straughan, R. 1975. Hypothetical moral situations. Journal of Moral Education, 4, 3, 183-189.

Walker. L., de Vries, B., & Trevethan, S. 1987. Moral stages and moral orientations in real-life and hypothetical dilemmas. Child Development, 58, 842-858.

Yussen, S. 1977. Characteristics of moral dilemmas written by adolescents. Developmental Psychology, 13, 2, 162-163.

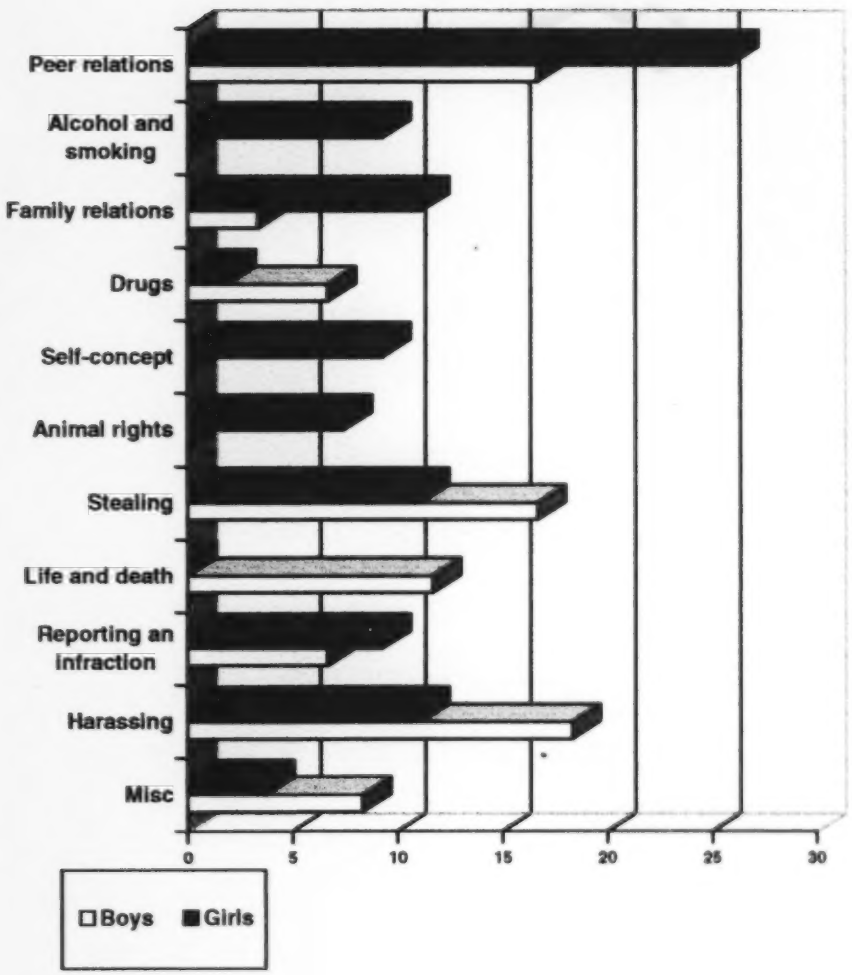

Figure 1. The percentages of the themes by gender.

Theme	Gifted students (%)	General students (%)
Peer relation	33	17
Harassing	7	17
Stealing	7	16
Reporting an infraction	11	5
Family relations	6	8
Life and death	7	5
Alcohol and smoking	0	4
Drugs	0	4
Self-concept	0	4
Animal rights	4	3

Table 1. The differences in theme identification between the gifted and general student populations.

Appendix A.

The Instruction:

1. Write a story about a person who faces a difficult situation where she or he must decide what is right or wrong. Write a story that could actually happen. Describe the person in your story and the situation she or he is facing in details. Please tell at least the following things in your story:

-Who is the main character in your story? How old is she/he, what does she/he look like?

-Are there other people involved in the situation?

-What is the thing that the main character in your story is thinking about?

-What kind of things does she/he think about when deciding what is right or wrong?

-How does she/he feel?

-How does the main character in your story act and what is her/his decision?

Appendix B

Example stories from the category "Peer relations"

"I was alone at recess. I am in sixth grade and I have blond hair. Yesterday I was with Liisa, but today Liisa was with Katri. Liisa had said in an unfriendly way, that she can not always be with me. Fortunately, the day ended soon. The next day Liisa came to me and asked me to be her friend. I was not sure what I should do, she had been so unfriendly yesterday. Finally I said that I'd rather be alone. Liisa was angry and turned away from me and I was not sure if I did the right thing. It was too late to take my words back and later on I was satisfied with my decision, because I didn't want to be with her only when she wanted to, but also when I asked her."

(Girl, general population)

"Ville is a 16-year old and 5'7. He is a normal young guy. He has many good friends who have recently started to steal things from stores. They also drink beer and some friends even use drugs. Ville has not done anything like that, but now he would like to be a tough guy like the others. Ville decides not to drink and not to do anything dumb, but his friends start to tease him. Now Ville has a problem: he must act like the others, or leave the gang. One day he sees how one of his friends gets arrested for stealing. Now Ville knows that he is not going to be a criminal. Ville finds new, nice friends and he is satisfied."

(Boy, gifted population)